



COMMENT

From facts to stage: rethinking science communication as theatrical performance

Commentary on

Science communication in changing political winds

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Abstract

Facts may have been declared dead, yet many science communicators continue to fight to keep them alive. At the same time, it is increasingly clear that preserving facts alone is not enough. To secure a meaningful place for science in today's world, science communicators must also develop new strategies that go beyond defending facts to fostering trust and engagement. They must fully embrace the 'post-post truth' condition, in which the blurring of fact and opinion has become deeply entrenched in public discourse; and where many no longer know – or care – what constitutes truth. This can be achieved by rethinking science communication as performance beyond content delivery. This means creating aesthetic, existential, sensorial, and other experiences that make engagement with science more about relationships and identity, and less about establishing a common ground of truth. We illustrate what this approach looks like through the Theatre Dialogues of Dissent – a Dutch science communication project on the polarisation surrounding climate change.

Keywords

Public engagement with science and technology

Received: 21st July 2025

Accepted: 29th October 2025

Published: 16th March 2026

Facts may be declared dead, but many science communicators still fight to keep them alive.

This fight is laudable. A commitment to truth, evidence, and critical thinking remains essential for science communicators to counter misinformation. As subjective narratives dominate public discourse, communicators must continue to pursue evidence-based reasoning and strengthen efforts to rebuild trust in scientific expertise.

But none of these strategies are enough, and they don't work in all situations and contexts.

Consider COVID-19: a case where expert accounts provided by credentialed scientists elicited resistance, counter-narratives, and an anti-vaccine movement. The problem wasn't just misinformation — though that certainly played a role, with social media amplifying rumours and giving small groups of sceptics significant public influence. It was also the erosion of shared epistemic ground and a clash of values, as activists opposed to vaccination used arguments related to liberty and individual rights, tapping into longstanding currents of vaccine hesitancy stretching back to the 19th century [Colgrove & Samuel, 2022]. In addition, expert pronouncements often failed to quell doubts and sometimes even fueled them [Lee et al., 2023]. For example, experts who prematurely downplayed the possibility that COVID-19 did not have a natural origin — but was instead engineered in a lab — contributed to public suspicion and debate [Harambam & Voss, 2023].

As bleak as all this may seem for science communicators striving to inform and engage the public about science, it is no reason to despair. Other avenues beyond the dissemination of scientific facts and data remain open.

This commentary highlights science communication activities that engage communities in polarised contexts by giving voice to often-excluded groups and fostering conversation across diverse perspectives. Consistent with recent research [e.g., Toomey, 2023], it contends this is a more effective approach than attempting to fill perceived gaps in the public's knowledge.

From walls to windmills. Bruce Lee once said, *Be water, my friend*. When attacked, bend with the attacker. Another Chinese saying goes: *When the winds of change blow, some build walls; others build windmills*. What then, would building windmills rather than 'truth walls' look like in today's context of science communication?

As the Science Wars in the 1990s teach us, debates about the social place of science often end in dilemmas and fruitless stalemates. The battle over knowledge and reality cannot be won or settled by clinging to a rigid notion of Truth (with a capital T) [Hacking, 1999, p. viii].

In today's world, science communicators must anticipate and embrace "*post-post truth*" — the condition in which misinformation, distrust in expertise, and the blurring of fact and opinion have become so entrenched that they dominate public discourse [Haack, 2019].

We do not use the term "*post-post truth*" lightly or cynically, as if facts no longer matter to anyone. Rather, we reserve it for an era where misinformation is pervasive, embedded in the mundane, everyday fabric of life, including science communication — and accelerated through digital tools and social media. More importantly, we wish to emphasise that some no longer know — or care — what constitutes truth [Leßmöllmann & Medvecky, 2026]. This is what sets *post-post-truth* apart from *post-truth*. Whether we are really headed in that direction remains to be seen, but we might as well prepare for the worst.

Thus, anticipating resistance and misinformation is key. Instead of reacting defensively, science communicators must proactively engage with the dynamics of polarisation, misinformation, and mistrust. This means working with these realities rather than fighting them at all costs.

Science communication as performance. We propose to rethink science communication as *performance*. By this we mean that science communication should extend beyond content delivery by creating aesthetic, existential, recreational, sensorial, and other experiences that make engagement with science more immersive and participatory.

This is not a radically new idea. We know from the science communication literature that people are driven more by emotions than rational analysis [Taddicken & Reif, 2020; Cook & Overpeck, 2018]. We also know that instead of presenting dry data, communicators can craft persuasive narratives that align with people's values and lived experiences to shape perceptions to maintain influence; for instance, through storytelling [Moser, 2010]. Science communicators can also build networks with trusted influencers, policymakers, and cultural figures to amplify their messages in ways that resonate with different communities.

Science communication as performance builds on these insights and takes them further by firmly embedding them in the 'post-post truth' world where facts take a backseat to something more crucial: building deeper connections with various audiences.

Some of this work is already under way. There is a growing trend among science communicators and researchers worldwide to incorporate narrative, visuals, arts-based, and interactive elements into their work, making scientific concepts more relatable, memorable, and immersive [Roeser et al., 2018]. These strategies often include performative elements, such as humour, theatre, and participatory experiences, which can transform scientific content into a spectacle, engaging audiences in ways that invite both attention and participation.

However, in many such cases, the goal is to spark curiosity about science and foster an emotional connection, ultimately making science feel more accessible and relevant to non-expert audiences. Underlying this engagement is often a form of subtle persuasion. For instance, efforts to implement STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) in education subtly encourage acceptance of scientific ideas, and influence attitudes. The message conveyed is that science is important and must be taken seriously. The very methods used to make science feel more relatable and engaging may also serve to reinforce its authority and significance.

What if we let go of persuasion? What would engagement centred on genuine multi-way conversation look like? Without the weight of persuasion, science communicators might be freer to experiment with more creative, playful forms of engagement that forge new connections between science and various publics. As we argue in the following sections, engagement of this kind also provides a legitimate space for contestation, values dissensus as a driver of creativity and epistemic refinement, and avoids handing over the framing of scientific questions to experts and elites [Mouffe, 2000]. The goal wouldn't be to forge agreement on facts (or the acceptance of facts), but the democratic management of dissent in society, with citizens and groups openly expressing and discussing their disagreements about scientific issues.

To illustrate this approach and highlight its potential, we turn to the *Theatre Dialogues of Dissent* — a Dutch research project on the polarisation surrounding climate change.

Drama and dissent. As in other countries, the climate crisis has become highly politicised in the Netherlands, with significant disagreement among citizens and political parties over its causes, solutions, and varying levels of trust in climate scientists and their research. Seeking to address polarisation around climate issues in a previous project, in 2023 and 2024, the initiators of the *Dialogues of Dissent* struck up conversations with random passers-by in four cities outside the Dutch metropolitan area. Using playful recruitment methods, such as a wheel of fortune game, they encouraged a diverse range of people to share their thoughts and concerns. The street conversations revealed a wide range of sentiments, including trust and distrust of science and public institutions; support for — and deep frustration with — the Dutch government’s climate policies; and enthusiasm, paranoia, and anger about climate activism and sustainability efforts [Willems et al., 2024].

Rather than debating these sentiments or correcting underlying misconceptions, initiators listened to voiced concerns, recognising these as valid starting points for conversation. For the follow-up project, they collaborated with climate activists, skeptics, scientists, and others — each holding strong, divergent views on critical issues such as biodiversity and climate change. They implemented a method known as “theatre dialogue,” in which professional actors dramatised key points of contention, such as the question of whether sea levels are rising. In this approach, the focus shifted from the substantive issue itself to the conflict and controversy surrounding it.

As a theatrical form that draws on the works of Boal and Freire [see: Boal & McBride, 2014], these theatre dialogues aim to generate drama through confrontation and tapping into emotion, thereby creating a more visceral, embodied connection with the audience [Kupper, 2017]. This can be achieved by personalising the issue through storytelling and character portrayal, by depicting diverse experiences, and by including the perspectives of individuals who are apathetic or angry. These dramatic encounters require raw material: situations, interpretations, and exchanges on which to build scenes. They serve to build relationships with participants from the outset and throughout the project, including those who dissent from the most commonly held view in participatory processes — that climate change is real and must be addressed [Cook & Overpeck, 2018].

Performances are followed by structured discussions to provide opportunities for audience members to share their perspectives, ask questions, and explore different — often, divergent — viewpoints. Once the space has been created for deepening and exploring controversy, participants are urged to see the controversy from other perspectives than their own.

In one workshop focused on the biodiversity crisis, bringing together farmers and biodiversity experts, the need for performative engagement beyond talk and dialogue became strikingly clear [Herzog & Serrano-Zamora, 2024]. At one point, a farmer posed a rhetorical question: “Do we even have a biodiversity crisis?” Biodiversity experts responded with factual statements, such as “If we look at the number of individuals within a species, we see a significant decline.” The exchange grew increasingly heated. However, as the workshop progressed, it became evident that the farmers were not necessarily denying the biodiversity crisis. Rather, they felt unfairly blamed by a society that rarely sets foot in their fields.

To express their perspectives, the farmers created a visual representation: two people pointing at someone in the centre, who looked down, while three others stood with their backs turned. When asked to interpret this, the farmer in the middle described feeling angry, while the turned-away figures symbolised citizens who ignored both the crisis and the burdens placed on farmers.

Agonistic encounters. This approach builds on theories of agonistic encounter, as described by Westphal [2019], who argues that the goal of public debate is to demand legitimacy for contending lifeworlds. In this view, debate is not about reaching agreement but about shifting one's perspective on "the other." Most theatre dialogue participants — climate activists, sceptics, scientists — appeared eager and willing to engage in conversation on these terms.

As one participant exclaimed, "I want to be surprised... It's about walking out feeling unsettled and saying, 'Oh, I didn't expect that.'" Other participants, including both climate activists and sceptics, sought to convince their opponents with arguments and evidence, both scientific and non-scientific. Yet others emphasised listening and mutual respect (rather than understanding), despite profound differences.

These responses suggest that agonistic encounters can help to channel tensions into productive exchange, whereby disagreement is valued as a resource for conflict engagement rather than understood as a failure of cooperation. Accordingly, the democratic legitimacy of this approach hinges on the inclusion of many dissenting voices, rather than on agreement or consensus-seeking.

Epistemically, these encounters help to identify and make explicit what is at stake for various actors. This is because — more so than dialogue oriented towards agreement — agonistic exchanges incentivise parties to articulate and refine their views in confrontation with competing claims [Van Bouwel & Van Oudheusden, 2017]. The interactions thus create opportunities for mutual learning, on the condition that there is a socio-cognitive dynamic; i.e., an interaction between contending parties and their problem definitions [Rip, 1986]. In short, alongside creating opportunities for conflict navigation and legitimate dissent, this approach enhances awareness of one's own stance and identity, while illuminating the positions, perspectives, and values of adversaries.

We do not expand on this approach further here. The point of this commentary is that activities such as the theatre dialogues focus on relationships — however fraught or difficult — in the context of polarisation, giving voice to members of the public who are often marginalised in science communication. Crucially, they are not about convincing participants, but about hearing other perspectives and allowing these perspectives to clash.

As an experiment in navigating the "post-post truth" condition, theatre debates herald a potentially promising direction for *science communication as performance*. This direction does not position science as an authority to be accepted, nor does it imply "giving up" on science. Rather, it urges participants — including science communicators — to mutually engage in discussion about controversial issues without "the science" becoming overbearing or invasive; and without the dismissive injunction to "get the facts straight."

Whereas the full impact of this approach remains to be seen, we feel confident in saying that it can function as a brave space, where adversaries engage in and rehearse conflicts as

legitimate opponents, rather than as enemies [Mouffe, 2000]. This is because dissensus and differentiation are key challenges in an increasingly polarised science-society landscape, both in the Netherlands and elsewhere. As there is no overarching ethical code or common ground to ‘do’ science communication, we must experiment and improvise [Medvecky & Leach, 2019, p. 37], based on the principle that “[s]cience should be debated in democratic institutions by the general public, or we risk creating societies which are more and more polarised between those who understand, use, and make decisions about science and those who do not” [Davies & Horst, 2016, p. 2].

The activities we have outlined require dedicated commitment, time, and resources. We do not claim that community engagement is a complete antidote to the issues of misinformation, mistrust, and polarisation that confront contemporary societies. Other strategies will still be necessary to address these challenges comprehensively. Facts and fact-finding remain essential in a post(-post) truth era, and we acknowledge the risk that theatre performances may sideline fact-centred dialogue, as the dialogues aim to engage audiences emotionally and dramatically. However, in the theatre dialogues truth claims are still made and heard. These claims are situated and relational, emerging from participants’ lived experiences rather than external verification alone. The professional actors aim to stay true to these perspectives, prioritising authenticity over dramatisation.

We must also acknowledge the challenge of scale. To be effective, micro-level, community engagement needs to be a recurring activity that engages multiple groups; and it needs to be articulated with other forms of science communication at the macro level, ensuring that individual interactions connect to broader public understanding, institutional messaging, and policy frameworks.

At best, what we propose may lead to deeper public involvement, where audiences feel heard and valued rather than simply informed or convinced. At the very least, this should enable new pathways for science communication and public engagement. The more crucial point is that discussion and debate on controversial issues such as climate change foster long-term interest, making science feel like an inclusive, evolving conversation rather than a fixed set of truths to be communicated and accepted [Creek et al., 2024].

As Swierstra and Rip [2007] remind us, diversity, heterogeneity, incommensurability, and antagonism have the potential to disrupt the fabric of society, but they also play a crucial role in keeping it dynamic and resilient. Nurturing these tensions should be central to science communication in an era of increasing scepticism — and perhaps indifference — toward science, expertise, and claims of authority.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to our colleagues at the Athena Institute for providing feedback on an earlier draft of this paper. In particular, we would like to thank Martijn Vos for sharing data and insights.

Funding information. This publication is part of the project Schurende Theaterdialogen (Theater Dialogues of Dissent) with file number NWA.1397.23.018 of the research program Dutch Research Agenda (NWA), which is financed by the Dutch Research Council (NWO).

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How to cite

Van Oudheusden, M. and Willems, W. (2026). 'From facts to stage: rethinking science communication as theatrical performance'. *JCOM* 25(01), C05. <https://doi.org/10.22323/295620251029000244>.



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